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Quality assurance for enhancement of higher education in Ethiopia: challenges faced and lessons learned¹

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Abstract

Following its establishment in 2003, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) has conducted the very first quality audits of Ethiopian universities. Despite the efforts of HERQA and others, these reveal that higher education institutions have made only modest progress in establishing robust and comprehensive quality assurance systems. While they have embraced the quality concept, many have yet to develop quality assurance policies and strategies and establish efficient structures that can systematically assure quality. A number of quality-related problems persist. Paramount among these is shortage of human capacity. There is lack of expertise in quality-related processes in higher education institutions. This also impacts on the work of HERQA as it seeks to recruit academics with the necessary combination of awareness and experience to assist it in undertaking external quality audits. In helping to raise the importance of quality issues on the agenda by carrying out quality audits and accreditations, HERQA has learned much since its establishment. This paper is offered in the hope that the lessons learned can be of value to sister agencies.

Definition of Terms

1. Higher Education Institution (HEI) – a university, university college or college that offers one or more degree awarding programmes
2. Pre-accreditation permit - permission granted to an HEI to function for only one year based on an assessment of an institution's programme (s): decided mainly on the basis of human capacity, material input and the curricula the HEI has put in place
3. Accreditation permit - permission granted to an HEI to function for three further years after the end of the pre-accreditation period: based on an assessment of the programme(s) granted pre-accreditation
4. Renewal of accreditation /re-accreditation - permission granted to an HEI to function for three further years beginning from the end of the accreditation period: based on an assessment of the programme(s) for which it had been granted accreditation

¹ This is an edited version of a paper read at the 10th biennial INQAAHE Conference, 30 March to 2 April 2009 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

5. Institutional Quality Audit - an in-depth analysis and assessment of the quality and relevance of programmes and of the teaching and learning environment. It also assesses the appropriateness and effectiveness of a HEI's approach to quality care, its system of accountability and its internal review mechanisms.

Background

Until the final decade of the 20th Century, higher education in Ethiopia was not given due attention: curricula were not always relevant to the country's problems, while graduate production capacity was not in line with the country's need for trained individuals (Ministry of Education, 2002). Since then, actions have been implemented to change that situation. Government has re-aligned the higher education system so that it can contribute more directly to its national strategy for economic growth and poverty reduction (Saint, 2004). There has been a steady increase in the number of students in higher education. Between 1994 and 2002 alone there was a 45% increase. On average the total number of students was growing at 15.0% per annum (MoE, 2002). Through two national Education Sector Development Programmes, the growth in higher education, particularly in the public sector, has been the highest of the different educational level enrolments, with an annual average increase of over 33% per year (MoE, 2007). The number of public higher education institutions has also grown from only two universities eight years ago to 21 by 2009. More are planned to be established. The Government has also facilitated and encouraged the establishment of private institutions of higher education and there are now more than 60 such institutions.

Sensitive to the fact that expansion of numbers alone would not satisfy the needs of the country, a Higher Education Proclamation made provision for the creation of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) which was established in 2003 with the aim of safeguarding and enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education in the country (FDRE, 2003). Its mission is to ensure that accredited HEIs are of an appropriate standard, that the programmes of study offered by these HEIs are of an appropriate quality and relevance to the world of work and the development needs of the country, and that the country's higher education sector is supported in enhancing the quality and relevance of its education provision.

HERQA has therefore undertaken several activities to date which include:

- pre-accreditation and accreditation of a number of programmes in private higher education institutions
- external quality audits in all the public and some private higher education

- institutions
- training of its staff, both locally and abroad, on issues of quality and relevance assurance and enhancement
- convening consultative and training workshops with stakeholders (public and private institution leaders, managers and academic staff and representatives from government organizations and professional associations)
- developing draft benchmarks for selected subjects; publication of procedures for external quality audits and accreditation processes.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: to describe those activities undertaken for enhancing the quality of higher education in Ethiopia, focusing on accreditation and the first ever university external quality audits in Ethiopia, to highlight some of the audit results, and to elaborate on some of the challenges facing HERQA and Ethiopian higher education.

HERQA's Establishment, Responsibilities and Development

The Agency

From its beginnings in 2003, HERQA has grown to a staff comprising a director, 9 senior experts, 3 experts, and 15 administrative and support staff. These are grouped in three sections: a quality assurance and enhancement team, an accreditation team, and an administrative support department. Additionally, two small groups work on human resource development, as well as policy and strategy for the Agency. All the experts are accountable to the director, though the organization has a flat structure so that it can handle its affairs with little bureaucratic red tape. This has many advantages: firstly, it encourages individuals to cooperate with each other towards achieving the goals of the organization as a whole. In addition, it enables resources, including people, to be deployed flexibly across tasks in a rapidly changing context.

Human capacity development has been supported from the start by two external organisations. Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) has provided a succession of senior advisers, whilst the Dutch Government has funded two projects helping develop capacity through formal staff training, fact-finding visits to agencies abroad, and the drafting of human resource plans and communication and research strategies.

A human resource plan was developed in 2007 and endorsed by the HERQA Board. Two staff members were awarded scholarships to undertake Masters at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, while more qualified staff made exposure visits to various countries in Africa, Asia and Europe.

As a guardian of quality and relevance, HERQA engages in appropriate research. Its research strategy builds on the mission and vision of HERQA and its general strategic plan. Some of the topics being explored include the accreditation procedure of HERQA, student assessment problems in HEIs, and perceptions about the quality of instructors and students in HEIs.

One of HERQA's mandates in the 2003 Proclamation (Article 82) is to provide information to stakeholders on the current situation and status of the institutions and to gather and disseminate information about the standards and programmes of study offered by foreign higher education institutions, as well as their general status.

HERQA's communication strategy has also been prepared with the financial help of the ASSIST-HERQA project. A newsletter called 'HERQA News' is issued on a quarterly basis and distributed to all HEIs and other stakeholders giving up-to-date information on the activities of the Agency. Through the national media, the public is regularly advised to visit the Agency to check on the status of private higher education institutions before they register for programmes. Opportunities to publicize the work of the Agency are also taken at educational exhibitions and other fora. Some of the documents have also been uploaded on the Agency's website: www.higher.edu.et

Accreditation

Pre-accreditation, accreditation and re-accreditation of private higher education institutions and some other non-governmental institutions are foremost in HERQA's activities (see earlier definition of terms). The accreditation team comprises 7 members.

To facilitate the work of the external assessors and help the private HEIs to recognize the standards and minimum requirements by which they will be assessed, 7 booklets containing guidelines, checklists and procedures for pre-accreditation and accreditation have been developed with the participation of stakeholders and on the basis of the Higher Education Proclamation. Similar guidelines for distance learning are being reviewed and a new guideline for the regulation of virtual learning has been designed.

Institutional Quality Audit and Enhancement

Institutional quality audit in HERQA's context is an in-depth analysis and assessment of the quality and relevance of programmes and of the teaching and learning environment.

Equally importantly, an institutional quality audit assesses the appropriateness and effectiveness of a HEI's approach to quality care, its systems of accountability and its internal quality assurance mechanisms.

The Quality Audit and Enhancement Team (QAET) comprise five members. It ensures that the higher education and training offered at any institution is up to standard, is relevant and of acceptable quality. The aim is to evaluate institutions at least once every five years with a view to submitting findings to the Ministry of Education. External institutional quality audits are conducted in both private and public higher education institutions.

The QAET team also runs training workshops on quality enhancement in HEIs and help them establish quality assurance systems. The training focuses on issues such as self evaluation, and drafting policies and guidelines on a range of issues including student assessment, teaching and learning, research, and outreach activities. Recently, the Agency provided training for about 150 instructors, administrators and leaders from two public and six private and other non-governmental institutions, in both the capital, Addis Ababa and in the regions. In addition, fifty-two instructors from private and public higher education institutions received training on quality management systems. The workshops were conducted with the help of professional practitioners from South Africa and the Netherlands and a VSO consultant on the HERQA staff.

As part of its quality enhancement effort, HERQA is helping higher education institutions devise subject benchmarks which they use when developing curricula. So far, bench marks for 11 disciplines are available (nursing, midwifery, laboratory technology, public health, business management, mathematics, chemistry, computer science, biology, medical science and agricultural engineering).

In preparation for the first ever external quality audits of Ethiopian universities, the Agency conducted various symposiums and workshops with stakeholders to develop protocols and guidelines for the preparation of institutional self evaluation documents as a prelude to external quality audits. Three national workshops were organized in 2006 to develop mutual understanding of key quality assurance concepts. In addition, quality audit protocols were developed with stakeholders from the HEIs and piloted in two public universities and three private university colleges.

The outcomes were later presented at a stakeholders' conference in June 2006 so that public and private higher education institutions could learn from the experience and move forward to establish quality care systems, undertake internal quality audits and prepare self evaluation documents for the Agency.

Quality Trends in Ethiopian Higher Education

Accreditation

Between 2006 and 2008, 185 programmes were granted pre-accreditation permits and 190 programmes were accredited in private institutions (Table 1). Since HERQA has a small staff, instructors from private and public HEIs were invited to assist in evaluating the curricula and facilities that private institutions had put in place.

Table 1: Number of pre-accredited and accredited private HEIs from 2006-2008.

P = Number of programmes I = Number of private HEIs

Year	Pre-accreditation				Accreditation			
	Granted		Denied		Granted		Denied	
	P	I	P	I	P	I	P	I
2006	87	30	32	13	64	21	-	-
2007	63	19	74	17	36	12	37	8
2008	35	18	62	18	90	31	31	12
Total	185	67	168	48	190	64	68	20

Spot checks to control fraudulent private higher education institutions are now a feature, with a series of surprise inspections. To date, 40 private institutions in the capital and regions have been inspected. The visits are meticulously planned with appropriate tools such as questionnaires, observation checklists and interview questions prepared beforehand to identify those HEIs that are not operating in accordance with the rules and regulations of the Ministry of Education and the accreditation criteria of HERQA.

External Institutional Quality Audits

The quality audit focuses on the evaluation of the quality of the HEI as a whole, assessing what mechanisms for quality assurance are in place, and whether the achievement levels of the graduating students match the degree concerned.

The institutional quality audit proceeds through a number of stages. The initial action is a self evaluation by the HEI to be audited. The external institutional

quality audit itself is carried out during a four day visit by a team of trained auditors from HERQA and from other HEIs. The key purpose of the audit visit is to validate the self evaluation document submitted by the HEI. During the visit the team studies documentation, visits facilities, meets with staff and students and observes teaching. After the visit, the team drafts an audit report which is sent to the institution for comment. Following the publication of the final audit report, the HEI is asked to prepare an action plan that seeks to enhance the quality and relevance of its provision. HERQA requests a copy of this plan and monitors its implementation in subsequent institutional quality audits which evaluate the extent to which the HEI has been able to use its action plan to enhance quality and relevance.

Since 2006, HERQA has conducted 18 external quality audits in 11 public and 7 private HEIs, 4 of which were pilot in nature. Subsequently, 8 public universities audits were published. Some of the major findings are summarized as follows:

Infrastructure and Resources

While Government is committed to providing infrastructure and learning resources to expand HEIs across the country, the audit reports show that most are suffering from shortage of classrooms and learning resources. There are long delays in the completion of buildings which are often poorly finished and not up to the standard.

Most classrooms are reported to be over-crowded and modestly equipped. Hawassa University indicates that “while class size can be 80-100 students, most classrooms are built to accommodate only 70 students. Crowded classrooms compromise the quality of teaching and learning”. In spite of the good provision of laboratory equipment and chemicals for practical work by Government, there seems to be a systemic lack in the management and maintenance of these resources. In the same university, some expensive lab equipment was not used “because of lack of software”.

In general, while Government has made a huge investment in higher education, including a massive building programme, many institutions consider themselves to be short of resources. However, few institutions have sound systems to ensure efficient resource management.

Quality Assurance Systems

All HEIs are aware of the necessity of assuring quality, but quality assurance mechanisms and systems are not fully in place. In most HEIs there is no system for obtaining data that can be used to judge the quality of the institutions. For

example, Bahir Dar University's audit reveals that the university has a plan to establish a quality assurance office, although it is noted that quality assurance does not yet appear in the organizational structure. The university did not seem to have recognized that quality assurance required the establishment of robust procedures and a cycle of monitoring feedback and actions that ensures development. The quality audit of Adama University also found that the university was committed to quality assurance, but had no written policy on quality assurance nor as yet any designated committee or unit with a specific and unique responsibility for this function. Gondar had gone a step further by being one of the first to set up a quality assurance and enhancement unit.

In general, all the audits showed that institutions lacked comprehensive and robust systems for quality assurance so it is very difficult for them to make any claims regarding the quality of the education they are providing.

Expertise and experience of staff

The HEIs reported that most staff lacked experience and training in teaching and research skills. As a result of the rapid expansion of higher education, new graduates with no teaching or research experience are appointed to teaching posts. Recognising this as a major problem, another project² has created staff development centres called Academic Development and Resource Centres (ADRCs) in the 9 established public universities. These provide short courses for staff on instructional skills, student assessment and a range of other topics. In time it is hoped that ADRC-trained staff will migrate away from the lecture method and weak student assessment which audits find to predominate.

Student Assessment

In general, student assessment is dominated by norm referencing and does not involve moderation. The assessment systems are insufficiently robust to assure compatibility of grading standards between cohorts of students. There is also concern about fairness. In many, the examination system is not sufficiently transparent to ensure that students are graded fairly and consistently. While students can appeal against their grade, this should not be the sole mechanism for guaranteeing fairness. Similarly, without inter-institution moderation, HERQA has a concern about grade comparability between different higher education institutions.

² EQUIP – the Educational Quality Improvement Programme (2004-2009) funded by the Dutch Government through NUFFIC. It involved a consortium of three Dutch universities – VU University Amsterdam, Van Hall Larenstein University of Professional Education and the University of Twente.

Although some departments have introduced other assessment methods, student assessment is dominated by mid-semester and end-of-semester examinations. There is no evidence that continuous assessment is widely practiced.

Curriculum Review and Design Procedures

Every HEI is expected to justify the relevance of its programmes and to have robust procedures for curriculum design, approval and review. HERQA auditors investigate the involvement of external professionals and employers in the process of curriculum design, evaluation and review. While all audited HEIs engaged in curriculum development, some report that they also use curricula from other institutions or curricula provided by the Ministry of Education. Some involve external peers and other stakeholders in curriculum development workshops, but only when they consider they lack expertise themselves. Most report they have not always involved external stakeholders from business and industry. This may be because of time constraints, lack of awareness of informed stakeholders, or unwillingness of business and industry to participate. While good legislation is in place on curriculum review which stresses involvement of external stakeholders, this is often not practiced in the universities.

Research and Outreach Activities in the Higher Education Institutions

All of the HEIs audited aspire to contribute to the development of the country through applied research, thereby reducing the levels of poverty and attendant risk of strife in the country. This is reflected on the visions, missions and goals of the institutions in their strategic plans and other legislative documents. For example, Arba Minch University is “to conduct relevant, fundamental and problem solving research”, while Jimma University is “to undertake academically rigorous and socially meaningful cutting edge research, disseminate knowledge and technologies, and provide consultancies to the public”. In addition, Jimma University is “to train high calibre professionals through community-based teaching and team-based research”.

All HEIs have a research and publication officer to help the academic and research vice president. Some of them have research policies and guidelines and publish various journals. The guidelines of research prepared by Jimma and Bahir Dar Universities are a case in point.

Most audited universities have created links and research collaborations with organizations within Ethiopia and abroad. These links provide funding, training, technical and managerial support. Mekelle, Hawassa, Jimma and Haramaya Universities all have many linkages.

Regardless of these efforts, senior staff and administrators indicate that there are a number of hurdles to be tackled if the institutions are to realize their vision of contributing to the development of the economy.

Most staff reports it was very difficult for them to actively engage in research. There are no incentive mechanisms to encourage them and the heavy teaching load made it difficult to dedicate 25% of their time for research as prescribed in the university legislation. Lack of training in research skills is also mentioned. Some cite lack of local journals or problems of sustaining local journals as reasons for the paucity of research. There are not many local research symposia and workshops where the staff can present their research.

The audited universities did not have a culture of publishing annual research reports. Such information for stakeholders, especially industry and service-giving organizations, would alert them to the research priorities of the universities and encourage collaboration.

The link between research and the community in provision of consultancy services is embedded in university legislation. Evidence for this was evident in some of the audits. Mekelle and Hawassa Universities are extending services in agriculture, education, finance and health. Hawassa University also intends to target chemical industries for consultancy advice. Presently, due to the lack of research and outreach policies, consultancies are often arranged on a personal basis without the knowledge of the institutions.

Conclusions: Challenges and Lessons Learned

Ethiopia is committed to expanding its higher education system. Since 1992 (and a new Education and Training Policy) more than 19 public universities and more than 50 private higher education institutions have come into being. This is a huge investment on the part of Government and the private higher education institution owners by any standard. As noted by Yizengaw (2007), expansion without the necessary and planned interventions could easily compromise quality.

HERQA became established in 2003 by proclamation with a mandate to assure quality and to reduce the negative impact of expansion. The Agency has now grown into a nationally recognized organization safeguarding and enhancing quality and relevance in Ethiopian higher education. In undertaking these roles, HERQA has faced many challenges, but by putting quality higher on the agenda, and by engaging with institutions through its quality audits, it has contributed significantly to enhancing the quality of higher education.

While acknowledging that the need to assure and enhance quality is embraced by both public and private institutions, it is early days and few have included an explicit quality assurance function within their legislation. Similarly, it is still rare to find a quality assurance policy or strategy. While some have set up quality assurance units, these are very much in their infancy and are just becoming functional. Still to be developed in most institution are mechanisms for systematic collection and analysis of data that informs decisions on quality. HERQA is seeking to promote the development of such systems at every opportunity.

The first ever institutional audits were an important step in the development of quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education. Understandably, given the challenges, there was much found lacking, but the Agency sees itself as a development partner and is helping institutions address their weaknesses. These included problems in student assessment which is norm- referenced without moderation, pressure on facilities and resources, lack of a research culture, and curricula which are often developed without widespread consultation. Of the most pressing issues, we draw attention to human capacity. Given the rapid expansion, the majority of staff lacks teaching experience and training. It is therefore not surprising that there is lack of expertise in quality assurance matters. This also impacts on the work of HERQA as it seeks credible individuals to be trained as external quality auditors and to be involved in programme accreditation. However, the Government has embarked on a programme of staff development that should help alleviate this problem. Inevitably, universities claim they lack adequate resources in the face of expansion, though audits revealed few had sound systems to ensure efficient resource management. Improving the ways existing resources are deployed can make a useful contribution to quality enhancement.

The audits serve to highlight the significant gender issues within Ethiopian HEIs. Females are in a minority both amongst staff and student despite affirmative action directed towards amelioration of the problem. Female academics with higher level qualifications are rare in the academic profile, particularly in senior positions. The absence of such role models may have a negative effect on the academic performance of female students and may explain the high levels of female student attrition. HEIs have made an effort to provide support through the appointment of gender officers and gender-based tutorial support. One private HEI, Unity University College, offers a fully integrated support regime for females. Despite such measures it would appear that higher education has a long way to go before gender parity is attained.

The following are among important lessons which serve to guide HERQA:

- The importance of communication with its stakeholders: to discharge its responsibilities effectively and efficiently, it has found the traditional tools of communication such as brochures, announcements on radio and TV and participating in symposiums and workshops are not enough to reach all the stakeholders. It has therefore begun participating in exhibitions and inviting stakeholders to come to the Agency in person to seek information. It plans to be more pro-active in the future
- Dissemination of good practice: HERQA encourages each HEI to distribute examples of good practice amongst the various units of the institution. HERQA also has a role in dissemination - namely to circulate instances of good practices among HEIs. It could be an agent of change by distributing information from one institution to another and serve as a forum for discussion about quality and quality assurance
- Inspection: HERQA believes that quality assurance is primarily the task of HEIs. However, the Agency has found it essential to develop 5-year cycle of university audits and a mechanism to keep a check on fraudulent private HEIs
- Quality assurance systems: a major lesson from audits is the need to build the capacity of HEIs to establish sound quality assurance systems to take responsibility for quality assurance on their own. In the future there will be an accelerated programme training instructors and managers of quality assurance committees and other quality units
- International perspective: HERQA cannot function effectively in isolation. It plans to widen its scope through experiences gained from engagement with countries whose agencies have accumulated significant expertise in the area.

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